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## ***Design and Shit: Reality, Materiality and Ideality in the works of Jean Baudrillard and Slavoj Žižek***

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“The organizing of things, even when in the context of technical enterprise has every appearance of being objective, always remains a powerful springboard for projection and cathexis. The best evidence of this is the obsessiveness that lies behind so many organizational projects and (of most relevance to our present discussion) behind the will to design.”

Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*

“To produce is literally to shit. “Do you in fact produce anything with all your riches?” Leroux demands of Malthus. “No, it is nature that produces everything, and when you get to the bottom of all your means of production, industry sends you back to agriculture, and in the end, your manure.”

Dominique LaPorte, *History of Shit*

## I. Introduction: Shit and Sociality

In the ivory tower of academia, talk of shit has scandalous odor. Perhaps because of the blatant affront to established decorum, philosophers construct the metaphor in order to challenge shimmering ideality with base materiality. The digestive metaphor appears in the works of Jean Baudrillard and Slavoj Žižek that consider the role of production in mediating social relations. This paper compares design and production implications of the two philosophical metaphors of shit. Drawing an analogy between metabolic production of shit and artificial production of consumer goods, I present Baudrillard's metaphor of material digestion against Žižek's metaphor of the idea's constipation as a philosophical interpretation of design by opposing motivations of standardization and customization. In particular, Baudrillard's assessment of shit as a process of homogenization in contrast to Žižek's celebration of shit as liberation reflects artificial mass production as a system of constructed and resistant meaning. The aim of this paper is to analyze and compare the metaphor of shit operative in Baudrillard's, 1969, "The System of Objects" and Žižek's 1989 "The Sublime Object of Ideology" in order to frame the question: how might a shit-product analogy inform our understanding of design?

This paper is not a comparison of Freud and Lacan's work on the anal stage of child development, as the source of the metaphor. Rather, the paper focuses on design implications arising out of the social production and management of shit. As such, it investigates the philosophical use and resonance of the biological metaphor for artificial production. If we interpret designed objects as artificial shit then we can account for design developments as Baudrillard suggests as symbols that control a constructed reality or as Žižek argues as symbols of resistance to systemic control. However, these two philosophical positions afford design as artificial production of shit either no agency (Baudrillard) or only resistance (Žižek). I argue that if we expand the metaphor of production as a digestive process to include acts of consumption and defecation then we may subvert the primacy of automatic, conceptual and systematic ideology and affirm the material agency of socially constructed meaning. Can we think of design outside the collective system of production at moments of individual eating or expelling? Or at moments when I buy something or throw something away?

Exploring the Freudian fecal metaphor allows us to characterize design as *intentional, contextual and mediating*. These features exceed the design metaphor derived of child development, as oral, anal or phallic. Despite the limitations, the metaphor also demonstrates the primal and evolving confrontation of reality through human production (both organic and artificial). Design efforts exercise collective adjustments to ideality, materiality and reality. The automatic metabolic and the intentional artificial are both subject to chaos and meaninglessness that Baudrillard suggests we struggle to overcome, Žižek celebrates. Considerations of design and shit, assert the demand of the material on the real and the ideal. Therefore, the value of the metaphor resides in the authoritative claim of the material, as shit, in an increasingly virtual, mediated, idealized, digitized, hygienic world. This paper digests the notion of design as a process of producing artificial shit and its implications, as follows:

1. I interpret Jean Baudrillard's 1968 *Le System des Objects* in which shit represents the productive result of a functional and complete metabolic system. The section considers the features of homogeneity, totality and clarity operative in his analysis of modern production as a fecal order.
2. I interpret Slavoj Žižek's notion of the idea's constipation whereby shit represents the resistant remainder of an incomplete system.
3. I combine the two opposing metabolic metaphors of systematic understanding as relevant to the systemic processes of artificial, mechanized mass-production.

In conclusion, I consider how the philosophical accounts can help us, as consumers and producers, reconsider designed objects as confrontations of systematized mass production, individual needs and shared responsibility.

## II. Material Digestion and Jean Baudrillard's 1968 *Le Systeme Des Objects*

Jean Baudrillard's 1968 'Le System des Objects' opens with the question, "How can we hope to classify a world of objects that changes before our eyes and arrive at an adequate system of description?" Reflecting to his agenda, his text attempts to describe a spoken 'system' of objects amidst permanent technological revolution that include, functional, non-functional, meta-functional, dysfunctional systems, as well as socio-ideological systems. For Baudrillard design is evidence of classification, where clocks and mirrors represent emergent modern self-consciousness. His book on object classification concludes with the definition that:

Consumption is not a material practice, nor is it a phenomenology of affluence. It is not defined by the nourishment we take in, nor by the clothes we clothe ourselves with, nor by the car we use, nor by the oral and visual matter of the images and messages we receive. It is defined rather, by the organization of all these things into a signifying fabric: consumption *is the virtual totality of all objects and messages ready-constituted as a more or less coherent discourse*. If it has any meaning at all, *consumption means an activity consisting of the systematic manipulation of signs*. (Baudrillard 1996: 218)

For artificial production, Baudrillard's articulation of the "virtual totality of all objects reconstituted as a coherent discourse" is pertinent. Mass production relies on mechanized consistency and industry standards that permit value recognized in a global scale. Modern design itself can be defined as an effort to make things universally useful, thus valuable. Hence, the 20<sup>th</sup> century stylistic attributes of neutrality, simplicity, uniformity, unified form, interchangeability and primary colors, codified as international style, aimed to serve basic universal needs. In other words, using Baudrillard modern design can be interpreted as the systematic manipulation of *shapes* towards a shared discourse about universalized modern life.

The connection between design and shit becomes more pronounced as we probe Baudrillard's text further. Within this larger project of objects as signs of consummated and abstracted relationships, the fecal metaphor appears, in the first chapter about functional systems and the *Structures of interior design*. Differentiating traditional procreative order from modern order, he writes,

Although it is different in kind from the traditional procreative order, this modern order nevertheless also depends on a basic symbolic system. Whereas the

earlier civilization, founded on the natural order of substances, may be said to have been underpinned by oral structures, the modern order of production, calculation and functionality must be viewed as a phallic order linked to the enterprise whose goal is the supersession and transformation of the given and the opening up of new objective structures; but it is at the same time a faecal order founded on an abstraction or quintessence meant to inform a homogeneous material world, on the measuring off and division of material reality, on a great anal aggressiveness sublimated into play, discourse, ordering, classifying and placement. (Baudrillard 1996: 28)

Baudrillard's biological metaphor of 'anal aggression' translates the digestive system as evidence of systematic organic absorption into artificial appropriation. The modern system of consumption generated by a measure of functionality aims to celebrate its own efficiency. We see this self-reflexive discourse in advertising, branding and product development applied systematically. Shit, as such, is evidence of a perfectly functional system of absorption. His philosophical use of the biological metaphor aims to present an argument of consumed objects as abstracted virtual relationships. The processing, the mediation, the standardization, the abstraction, makes an object meaningful. Objects understood as products of a total process characterized by 'anal aggression' are evidence, for Baudrillard, of homogenization, by which the external world has been digested, absorbed and reformed. The first feature of a Baudrillian design system is functional efficiency and the sovereignty of human intent. Shit is the product of this systematic and total abstraction. Market determined designed objects fit this analogy, whereby brands express specific social relationships/status. We exercise and perform our sociality by buying the same things or watching the same commercials. Thus, products represent the culmination of a system of mass production, just as shit represents the fulfillment of a process of digestion.

Baudrillard's artificial appropriation results in the condition, whereby,

Man is thus bound to the objects around him by the same visceral intimacy, *mutatis mutandis*, that binds him to the organs of his own body, and 'ownership' of the object always tends virtually towards the appropriation of its substance by oral annexation and 'assimilation'. (Baudrillard 1996: 27)

The fecal metaphor describes digested reality characterized by total consistency, homogeneity, control and clarity. In other words, shit is an expression of the world reproduced and transformed and rendered homogeneous. The pleasure of the anal phase of development arising out of a sense of mastery and control is founded on continual consumption punctuated by instances of perceived totality. In shit, the process of consumption comes to temporary fulfillment and conclusion. Baudrillard explains this temporary fulfillment as unfulfillment, writing,

The systematic and limitless process of consumption arises from the disappointed demand for totality that underlies the project of life. In their ideality sign-objects are all equivalent and may multiply infinitely; indeed, they must multiply in order at every moment to make up for a reality that is absent. Consumption is irrepressible, in the last reckoning, because it is founded upon a lack. (Baudrillard 1996: 224)

This system of symbolic consumption endlessly constructs an illusion of totality that is fueled by the industrial mass production and today accounts for a global consumer culture. Homogeneous totality is thus the second feature of a Baudrillardian system of production. More shit (products) denote more value, more functional clarity, more control and more consistency. McDonalds, Starbucks, IKEA and the like offer consumers a sense of control in the form of consistency and reinforce the belief that we are the same because we understand the same signs. Advertising in social media is also premised on this belief.

The third feature of a shit derived metaphor of object relations that includes homogeneity and totality is absolute conductivity/ communication. Baudrillard explains that total communication preserves the lure of totality as certainty and the fuels infinite need for totality. A complete system of resonant references demand that,

Everything has to intercommunicate, everything has to be functional—no more secrets, no more mysteries, everything is organized, therefore everything is clear. This is not the old slogan of the house-proud: a place for everything and everything in its place. That obsession was moral, today's is functional—and explicable in terms of the faecal function, which requires absolute conductivity in all internal organs. Here we have the basis for a character profile of technical civilization: if hypochondria is an obsession with the circulation of substances and the functioning of the primary organs, we might well describe modern man, the cybernetician, as a mental hypochondriac, as someone obsessed with the perfect circulation of messages. (Baudrillard 1996: 28)

This constitutes an epistemological implication whereby in the modern system of signification, the systematic efficiency is the message, the digestion of meaning is meaning and the closed circuit of consumption is total. Designed objects that reflect and promote their production as transparent, clear and hygienic, attest to this tendency. The efficiency of mechanized mass production in all its forms hold the assembly line, like a digestive track, as a symbol of a well-functioning, well-producing society.

Shit as the product of systematic disclosure is the biological example of artificial standardized and efficient production. McDonalds, Coca-Cola, Ford cars and similar examples of historical industrial mass production represent products of the assembly line perfected and celebrated. Design derived of standardization makes products a culmination of an abstracted, mechanical and automatic process. What we buy is a branded, externalized process of global signification. The safety and comfort of a Starbucks or McDonald's at any metropolitan city, from Chicago to Barcelona, resides in the transparency of a recognized system offering predictability and perceived control. Baudrillard, explains,

What man gets from the objects is not a guarantee of life after death but the possibility, from the present moment onwards, of continually experiencing the unfolding of his existence in a controlled, cyclical mode, symbolically transcending a real existence the irreversibility of whose progression his is powerless to affect. (Baudrillard 1996: 104)

The weight of such design systemization related to mass production and mechanization, is felt most in developing countries struggling to maintain local identity against mass produced products. For example, the symbolic character of Persian carpets or Bengali

*Jamdani* saris is enhanced by protected production mystery. In contrast, early 20<sup>th</sup> century models of production prioritized efficiency of process over symbolic form. For example, Bauhaus products aimed to combine attention to materials with the clarity of the industrial production process. In contrast, in examples of post-modern design we see discontent with standardized modern design as authoritative, neutral, boring and static. Gunner Anderson's 1964 oozing rubberized armchair, Wes Wilson's *Grateful Dead* posters, Sex Pistols' *God Save the Queen* Album cover, among others, exemplifies postmodern retaliation.

According to Baudrillard, reality gives way to the controlled, designed comfort of virtuality. The impulse to 'de'sign or signify everything within a system arises out of primal fear of chaos. Design offers transcendence from the reality of accidents, chance, change and chaos. Materiality, conceptuality and reality, merge in the shit analogy as a reconstituted world by collective intention, stripped of chance. This is the design ethic post World War I and II that made the source of significance universal, basic and shared in ideological abstraction. In 1968, Baudrillard was writing within this context of systemic universal demands of abstraction in a struggle to make a safe but empty world. In that world, design was the agent of neutralization, and, Baudrillard's shit analogy gave that processed neutralization a rotten smell.

### III. The Idea's Constipation and Slavoj Žižek

Baudrillard extracts a system of material relations from the Freudian metaphor of the anal phase, whereby shit symbolizes control, absorption and systemic efficiency. Slavoj Žižek contemporary philosopher, influenced by Lacan, offers a different interpretation of shit. Combining the metaphor of shit or the Freudian anal phase with the Hegelian dialectic, Žižek uses the metaphor to denote systemic resistance, the failure of full absorption, control, assimilation and certainty. Of Hegel and the metaphor of shit, he writes:

So, to pursue the rather tasteless metaphor, Hegel was not a sublimated coprophagist, as the usual notion of the dialectical process would lead us to believe. The matrix of the dialectical process is not that of excrementation-externalization followed by a swallowing (re-appropriation) of the externalized content, but on the contrary, of appropriation followed by the excremental move of dropping it, releasing it, letting it go. What this means is that one should not equate externalization with alienation. The externalization which concludes a cycle of dialectical process is not alienation, it is the highest point of dis-alienation; one really reconciles oneself with some objective content not when one still has to strive to master and control it, but when one can afford the supreme sovereign gesture of releasing this content from oneself, of setting it free. (Žižek 1989 : xxi)

Žižek reconfigures the relationship between materiality, conceptuality and reality by suggesting that the material world resists conceptualized transparency. Consequently, the experience of life exceeds our longing for abstract certainty. The production of material things is necessarily a conceptually insufficient and incomplete process. As such, for Žižek, the faecal metaphor is evidence of release not absorption, stating that the "[...] the standard critical reading constructs the Hegelian absolute Substance-Subject as thoroughly constipated – retaining within itself the swallowed content [...] but what is the counter-movement: Hegelian Shitting?" Here, Hegel adds another

philosophical layer to the triad of production, consumption and social meaning. According to Žižek, Hegelian constipation as the struggle to synthesize and contain, fails. Instead he argues that freedom resides in the gap between knowing and not knowing, control and chaos. For Baudrillard the virtual world of artifice and mediated messages permit a false sense of control that reality withholds. For Žižek there is no comfort in the delusion of secured meaning. Shit is not the culmination to a total system that produces meaning but rather its failure. The meaning of shit is not that it is functional fertilizer for more production instead it resists a system of function. Production as a metaphor of shit becomes evidence of freedom by which materiality triumphs over conceptuality or rather ideology.<sup>i</sup>

We therefore, cannot design a complete product. We can only produce an incomplete experience open to change, open to consumer interpretation and needs. Shit, and by extension of this essay's argument, artificial things are products qualified by the limits of human experience. For Žižek, the idea's constipation results in the incomplete release of meaning that accepts life as evolving, changing, incomplete and resistant to complete disclosure. Of the necessity of incompleteness, Žižek explains,

Shitting is the immanent conclusion of the entire process: without it, we would be dealing with the 'spurious infinity' of an endless process of sublation. The process of sublation itself can only reach its end by way of the counter-move [.....] True cognition is thus not the notional 'appropriation' of its object: the process of appropriation goes on only as long as cognition remains incomplete. (Žižek, 1989:xiv)

As a design example related to incompleteness, I offer Jerzsy Seymour's *Skate Scum*, 2004 that was a location specific amorphous structure. The installation was intended as a space for skaters, an otherwise marginalized and hidden urban group. In the absence of skaters the installation became a mysterious, cave like shell, an oozing meaningless interruption in the hygienic city of Tokyo. The presence of skaters animated the twisted ramps with the purpose of play. The installation was an invitation awaiting a response. It was structurally incomplete. In this way, Seymour's installation performs Žižek's idea of structural resistance to ideality by subverting the concept of glittering urbanity without marginalized groups such as skaters. Similar examples can be found in Jurgen Bey's, *Do Add* chair (2000) with one short leg that requires the user to add support, Marjin van der Poll's *Do Hit* chair (2000) that is delivered to the consumer as a cube of metal (and a sledge hammer) which the consumer hits into a chair shape or Kristina Niedderer's *Social cups* that only stand up when linked to another cup. There are many such contemporary examples of products that aim to interrupt the conceptual primacy of an autonomous, complete and functional object. Other strategies of interruption include Do-it-yourself attitudes that promote making as an exercise of autonomy and subversive consumerism that for example transforms mass-produced products and its functions as product hacking.

#### **IV. Design and Shit?**

Baudrillard and Žižek use the metabolic system as a material metaphor for the cycle of consumption and production, drawing from the Freudian anal stage and the Hegelian dialectic. This essay has argued that the shit analogy addressing materiality, conceptuality and reality can be extended to the understanding of design. However, confessedly, there are at least two limitations of the analogy.

1. Baudrillard and Žižek, both describe the metaphor as an autonomous system. No references to context, content, of consumption are made. The understanding of the digestive system apart from a larger metabolic system truncates the world prior to consumption and post-consumption. Where we are has much to do with what we consume, absorb and reject. The digestive process from a larger ecological or metabolic system renders the understanding of associated social relations isolated. Design of the artificial, by this analogy, would be a construct in a vacuum, a system of production without reference to acts of consumption, distribution, function etc.
2. The pairing expresses inherent contradiction in the metaphor, the ecological amnesia of the metaphor but more fundamentally it is premised on the equivalence between organic and inorganic/ artificial production. Can we assume the systems of consumption to be systematically and epistemologically compatible with artificial production?

Despite these glaring limitations beyond the scope of this paper, I suggest that there is much to be learned about the relation of materiality and ideality. Baudrillard speaks of an escape from reality into virtuality that can be constructed and controlled. Žižek insists on the irrepressibility of reality, ugly or not. The production of meaningful shit in the cases of Baudrillard and Žižek rests on the necessary and incomplete containment of shit, of material reality itself. While how we produce, consume and organize shit is endlessly debatable, the fundamental struggle of reality, materiality and ideality remains relevant to design. Couched in terms of responsibility, not control, relations not systems, we understand shit as collective, regardless of systemic organization. Baudrillard and Žižek, use the metabolic metaphor as systemic organization of material relationships. However, intentionality is lacking in the metabolic process they hold to be an example of artificial production. Shit happens. Therein lay the material threat. Shit happens, with or without intention. Design premised on intentionality has little in common with an automatic system. What it shares, however, is the inevitability of things, produced, consumed. Shit happens. But, design does not simply, happen. Design is made. Design is deliberation, not defecation.

In contemporary design examples, we see evidence of consumption driven deliberation that resists an ideality of systemic appropriation or resistance. Apple products though hugely popular do not escape critique regarding poor labor conditions. The popular interest in design intention is apparent in NY Times bestseller lists that include Steve Jobs' autobiography. The documentary trilogy of *Helvetica*, *Objectified* and *Urbanized*, present a robust discussion about the consequences and intentions of design. Similarly, the 2010 Hollywood movie, *The Social Network*, responds to popular fascination with intentionality of Facebook. Unlike 20th century design that sought to raise normative standards of living through particular visions of an idealized, modern, clean world, contemporary design shows an awareness of design consequences that exceed or fail idealized systemic intentions. Books such as Nassim Nicholas Taleb's, *Black Swan*, Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink*, offer various design examples to support epistemological uncertainty. The current turn away from utopian idealizations in favor of critical suspicion is also evident in conference topics related to design that range from design activism, design and politics, the future of design frontiers, etc. On the other hand, 'cradle to cradle' efforts of sustainable making offer another interpretation of shit premised on elimination by absorption. Symbolic and practical connections between waste and



survival certainly warrant debate regarding ideologies of ecological priority. Vance Packard's 1963, *The Waster Makers*, can be read along with Baudrillard's, *System of Objects*, as exposing the constant corrosion and creation of meaning. In the global context, in countries, such as Bangladesh under threat of engulfment by the rising Bay of Bengal, there is much concern for a sustainable future as there is concern over alleviating poverty today. In these cases the metaphor of shit can be extended to include discussions surrounding symbolic and material waste identified, contained, eliminated. What is the symbolic, ecological, creative, social or commercial value of biological and artificial remainder or excess? Design can begin to contextualize, mediate and deliberate on some of these shared uncertainties. The absorption of uncertainty (not ideality appropriated or resisted) into these discussions of designed symbolic identity and practical solutions chart a new configuration of materiality, reality and ideality.

If for Baudrillard shit represents systemic efficiency and for Žižek systemic failure how is the production of meaning possible? Is there a place for human or object agency between Baudrillard's transparency and Žižek's opacity of the modern experience? The potential agency of shit or the production of meaning can be found through yet another reference to shit in Dominique La Porte's *History of Shit*. Here La Porte argues that the removal of shit and waste corresponds to city development and consequently civilization as purification/sanitation. The management of shit becomes a politically charged issue that differentiates between private and public waste. La Porte offers us the insight that the placement of shit makes it political. While Baudrillard and Žižek present two divergent views of meaning production, La Porte reminds us that place, makes shit public or private and the production of meaning individual and social. La Porte interprets, Baudrillard's emphasis on the pleasure of control and Žižek's emphasis on the pleasure of escape, as the pleasure of directed release determined by the placement and location of shit.

Of the politicization of shit La Porte writes,

The hallmark of this accumulation is the individuation of waste and its assignation to the subject—legal proprietor of the product of his dejections. To each his shit! Proclaims a new ethic of the ego decreed by a State that entitles each subject to sit his ass on his own heap of gold. Thus, a 'private' thing—each subject's business, each proprietor's responsibility—shit becomes a political object through its constitution as the dialectical other of the 'public.' (Laport 2000:46)

Shit as a private product determines the public by negation. La Porte's metaphor of shit denotes private production that has public implications. The social systems of Baudrillard and Žižek are in La Porte, political, whereby power is exercised in removal and regulation. (Laport 2000:48)<sup>ii</sup> This assessment could be extended to the context of waste and sustainability previously mentioned where private shit and waste has public, environmental and global consequences. In sum, all three references aim to articulate socio-political relationships founded on metabolic processes. The analogies to consumption prompt questions about production, and consequently design. Limitations of the application of the Freudian stages of development to design help provoke alternate characterizations of designed production. If design is not exactly like shitting or shit then what is it?

## V. The Production of Meaningful Shit

While dependent on consumption the metaphor operates as distinct phases, oral and anal. The child's world explored and excreted is presented as distinct phases and implies that artificial production is also distinct from consumption. The awareness of externalization and manipulation of reality carries the child from a passive consuming being to an active producer. Production understood as akin to shitting and the anal phase of self-awareness, suggests awareness but not intentionality. The child does not 'will' to shit but recognizes having produced only in retrospect. The distinction between the oral and the anal, consumption and production, ingestion and excretion, alongside the lack of contextualization, compares an automatic metabolic process with an active process (phallic phase) of production. Related to the willful forgetting of consumption and the oral phase, the analogies also forget the context of consumption and production as forming the content of fecal matter. La Porte analyzes the removal and containment of shit but does not relate it to the context of urban consumption and congestion. These 20<sup>th</sup> century considerations of production anticipate 21<sup>st</sup> century thinking about object relations in the philosophical perspectives of Object Oriented Ontology, Actor Network Theory and New Materialisms. The 21<sup>st</sup> century realities of systemic ecological challenges and artificial waste compound 20<sup>th</sup> century metaphorical role of shit as metabolic production and design as artificial production.

The relationship between mass-production and shit presents a discursive site where material reality challenges disengaged ideality. In this way, Baudrillard's 1968 critique confronts the universal and ideological International Style, La Porte's 1978, history explains the Urban Renewal impulse for hygienic and clean cities and Žižek's 1989 announcement reveals postmodern difference, chance and immanence. Their works expose the Hegelian and Freudian roots fueling a consumption model of design meaning and offers direction towards post-consumption notions of social consequence over individual intent. For example, read through the metaphor of shit, urban renewal projects offer a cautionary tale of control by isolation, as Jane Jacobs suggested in the *Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Design disciplines have historically and inherently practiced these philosophies that mediate ideality and reality. Contemporary designers like Jerszy Seymour, explicitly practice this form of discursive design through works entitled, *Scum, New Order, Living Systems, Coalition of Amateurs* and *Pipe Dreams*. Droog Designs promises similarly that every product tells a story. Design as social, cultural and political narrative adds nuance to the 20<sup>th</sup> century confrontation of modern ideality and materiality. Design discourse is essentially 'shit-talk' that insists on the primacy of experienced materiality over ideology, defends particular experience over universal solutions, and confronts life along with the accidental, the horrific, the unimaginable, the catastrophic threat of meaninglessness.

If we follow the 20<sup>th</sup> century trajectory of shit understood as a material threat to ideality into the 21<sup>st</sup> century awareness of object agency, we find that products of metabolic and artificial production are no longer mere passive products but dynamic, relational, and confrontational events. The retrospective on shit philosophy exposes the tenuous distinction between human and non-human. Is shit human or non-human? Is consumption a metabolic or an artificial process? How we understand our practices of consumption of the metabolic and the constructed depends on our understanding of shit as functional product or resistant remainder. If so, what is our shared responsibility regarding 21<sup>st</sup> century metabolic-artificial shit-waste as political object? The primacy of

inter-objective relations seems to characterize 21<sup>st</sup> design discourse in contrast to the ideological inter-subjective intentions of 20<sup>th</sup> century modern design.

In conclusion, Baudrillard and Žižek begin to expose our uncertain and ironic relationship with things and each other. The next step, beyond this essay, in this exploration of ideality and reality via materiality would be to investigate the link between Slavoj Žižek and Graham Harmon's Object Oriented Ontology suggested by Timothy Morton in *Realist Magic, Objects, Ontology and Causality* (2013). By invoking *The Shawshank Redemption*, the Morton invokes yet another image of shit and writes,

Think *The Shawshank Redemption*. All the way through we are led to believe that Red, the cynical institutionalized narrator, is telling the story of the magnificent, liberated and liberating Andy Dufresne. But when Red opens the box under the tree, he and we discover simultaneously that the entire story was actually happening to him, that Dufresne's entire performance was devoted to setting free the inner Red, hence the "redemption" in the title. Both movies model beautifully a feature of OOO that Harmon has linked to Slavoj Žižek. Causation is in some sense retroactive, and apoleptic irony is thus responsible for the thrill for retroactive causation. (Morton, 2013: 147)

The analogy drawn between the metabolic production of shit and the artificial production of things relies on speculative retroactive causation. The shock of consumer goods reinterpreted as shit derived of a mechanized and autonomous system of production throws us back to question the story of things we make. If we interpret, Red as a product of Baudrillard's institutionalized perfectly functional system and Dufresne as a resistant escapee *ala* Žižek, we find liberation depended on Dufresne's ability to swim through shit. The analogy of design and shit prompts us to ask the worthy question: can we find redemption in overconsumption, exhausted resources, economic disparity and ecological calamity? An answer to this question requires a 21<sup>st</sup> century reassessment of LaPorte's shit as political object and the limits of human material responsibility and ideological control. It requires a story of speculative retroactive causation back to consumption practices, to design and food, to Andy Dufresne's spoon used to dig his way into the sewer and out to freedom.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989). “...the gap between notion and existence is precisely the mark of finitude; it holds for finite objects like 100 thalers, but not for God; God is something I cannot have (or not have) in my pocket.” (xvii)

“Things ‘materially exist’ not when they meet certain notional requirements, but when they fail to meet them—material reality is as such a sign of imperfection.” (xx)

<sup>ii</sup> “The goals of the waste police are directed elsewhere; and even, at the level of discourse, we cannot identify goals per se. If something like a goal can be said to be achieved, it is always at the price of a certain loss of the object (in this case, shit), which is bypassed in favor of its symbolic substitute. Furthermore, it is less the object in question that counts than the subject’s relationship to it. The loss of the object enfolds a shift in the subject’s relationship to his shit, a relationship that now includes his dangling and dependent position vis-à-vis absolute State.”

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